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Bipartisan effort helps save Highlands

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FRAN WOOD

So much of our government seems to function like a professional wrestling match, with the two sides hurling insults at each other, that it's nice once in a while to make note of an instance like the Highlands Stewardship Act, where legislators from both sides of the aisle worked together in the common interest.

It isn't as flashy a headline and doesn't make for very good talk radio, but in the long term we all benefit.

People have talked for years about the need to start preserving this 2 million-acre tract of land, which covers portions of New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut. Like the Pinelands to the south, the Highlands increasingly has been threatened by creeping development that not only threatens the land itself, but could compromise a huge aquifer of clean water that lies beneath it.

Enter the Highlands Stewardship Act, a bill that originally sought \$250 million to buy up some of the most sensitive land in that region. It wouldn't preserve the Highlands, but it would be a start. Equally important, it would be a declaration that this land matters.

After failing to win support in the last Congress, the bill was reintroduced earlier this year by New Jersey Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-11th Dist.) and Rep. Sue Kelly (R-N.Y.) in the House of Representatives, and New Jersey Democrats Jon Corzine and Frank Lautenberg in the Senate.

They knew it would not be an easy sell. Not only are federal deficits soaring, but Western legislators are often suspicious of land-use proposals that would benefit or even simply come from the East.

When Frelinghuysen sensed the original figure wouldn't get approval, he scaled back his bill -- HR1964 -- to \$110 million, and submitted it to the House Resources Committee.

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"We have to be realistic," he explains. "Only three members of the committee live east of the Mississippi, and there are some long-standing grievances. A lot of people have very contrary views on the whole issue of ownership of lands in Utah, California, places where some high-handed things have been done. If we wanted to help New Jersey, we obviously had to work with the staff and (California's Rep. Richard) Pombo (head of the Resources Committee) to get the bill considered."

Even this plan was fragile enough that a partisan split among Eastern legislators would have doomed it. So the effort was coordinated across party lines.

"Congressman Frelinghuysen and I spoke after the bill was accepted by the House committee and I decided to match that bill in the Senate," Corzine explained Thursday. "He has been a real leader fighting to save New Jersey's Highlands in the House of Representatives, as I have worked for the same in the Senate."

"Jon knew our bill was on a fairly expeditious path," says Frelinghuysen, "and he attached my bill to the Healthy Forest Restoration bill, which the Senate happened to be debating that day. So this came about as a result of his quick action and leadership."

New Jersey Rep. Jim Saxton (R-3rd Dist.) also deserves "a great pat on the back," says Frelinghuysen. "He was a huge asset in working with Pombo (and in) helping to navigate all the very strong personalities."

The House and Senate ultimately approved the bill, although the Sierra Club didn't like linking it to the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, which they fear will jeopardize old-growth forests and wilderness and increase commercial logging in environmentally sensitive areas. But Frelinghuysen says most environmental groups view the bill, and its Highlands amendment, as "a huge victory."

"We kept the Highlands coalition informed throughout the whole process," he notes. "The stakeholders were all aware of how difficult the navigation was. To get our New Jersey bill to the President for his signature, you use whatever vehicle will get it there."

Corzine agrees. The act is, he says, "a great victory for New Jersey."

Granted, \$110 million won't preserve the Highlands. But it plants the flag in the ground, and gives the states something on which to build.

Just last week New Jersey's own Highlands Task Force, a 19-member group of officials and environmentalists appointed by Gov. James E. McGreevey, began forging a plan to help slow development. With 5,000 Highlands acres disappearing each year to suburban sprawl, the governor has asked that the plan be completed in six months.

But the most heartening aspect of the Highlands Stewardship Act is the bipartisan cooperation that brought it about.

"Open space preservation is an issue on which most of our delegation agrees," Corzine said last week. "This is an instance when we worked together on a matter of great importance for the people of New Jersey."

In fact, says Frelinghuysen, this kind of cooperation among New Jersey's federal legislators isn't as unusual as the lack of press attention might lead you to believe.

"We meet periodically, sometimes with the governor, sometimes one-on-one, to go over projects that relate to things like keeping the port of New York and New

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Jersey open, cleaning up the Passaic, funding for Picatinny Arsenal and Fort Monmouth," he says. "We compare notes because sometimes they can do things in the Senate that we can't do in the House, and vice versa.

"Partisanship is put aside quite a lot when it comes to looking after things that affect New Jersey."

Fran Wood is a Star-Ledger columnist.

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